

learning a new language

benefits of signing in older children
words LISA ARMONY

zoë

Leit could find every letter of the alphabet on a computer keyboard before the age of 2. By 3, she could identify complex words like “chimpanzee” and “giraffe” without prompting. Now 4 years old, the Los Angeles preschooler reads and writes full sentences and can follow along when read her favorite stories.

What’s her secret? Zoë’s exceptional literacy skills, says her mother, certified American Sign Language (ASL) presenter, Etel Leit, comes from her knowledge of ASL.

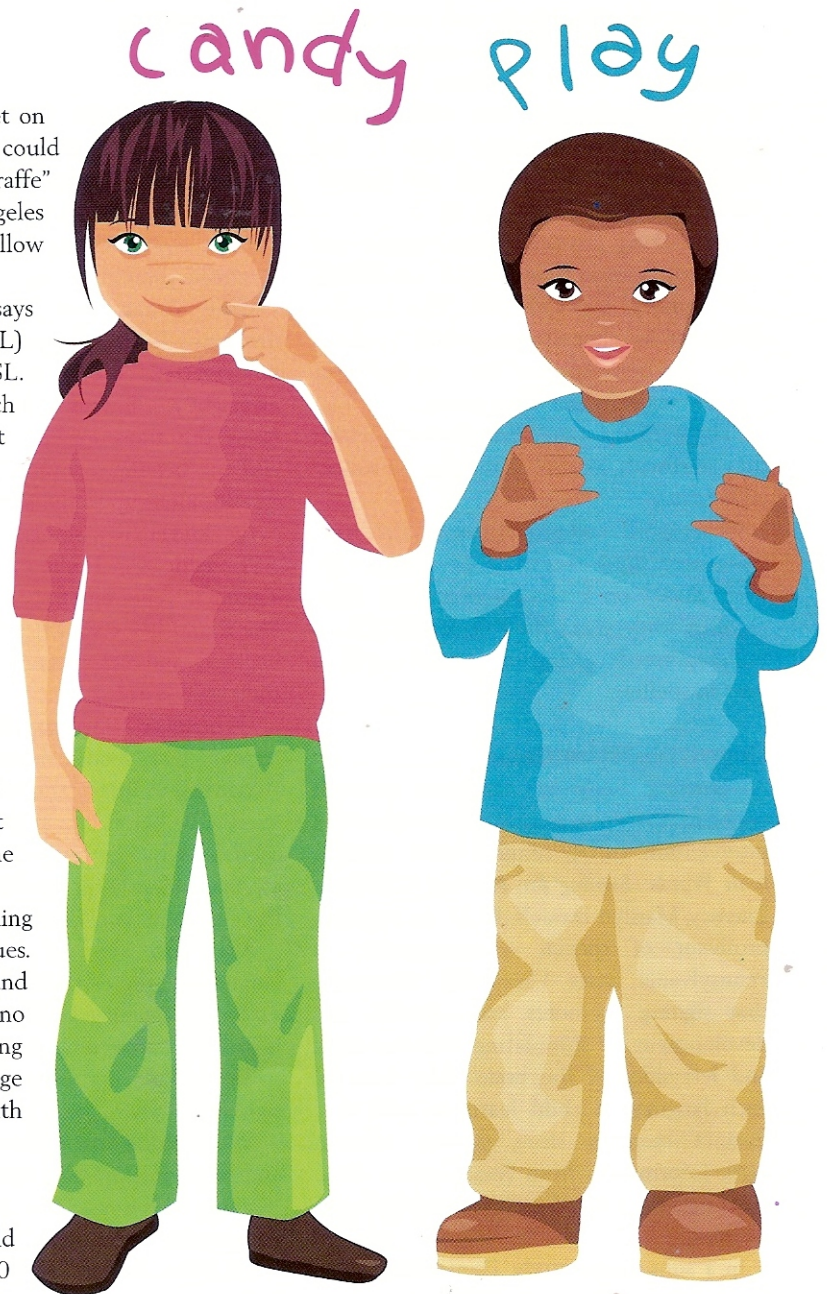
Once resigned to children with hearing and speech difficulties, ASL is a hit on the baby scene because it allows preverbal, hearing infants to communicate long before they can talk. But the benefits of signing don’t stop there. More and more, early education experts and parents alike are observing how ASL improves literacy skills and promotes academic development in hearing preschoolers and elementary-age children when used as a complement to spoken language.

“Signing enhances children’s ability to take in and store information because it combines so many modes of learning,” says Leit, founder of SignShine, which teaches ASL to hearing children, families and educators throughout the Southland. The LA expert taught more than 60 signs to her daughter before she was 15 months old. Zoë is now ASL conversant.

The combination of speaking and signing gives meaning to children’s natural tendency to gesture, Leit continues. And because learning takes place auditorily, visually and kinesthetically, it is perfectly suited to all children, no matter what their learning style. Leit’s forthcoming book, *Signing for Love*, explores how sign language helps parents build deep emotional connections with their children.

Pre-Literacy Boost

According to experts, the average non-signing child between the ages of 3 and 5 can say 1,000 to 2,000 words and knows 10 letters. Signing children at the



same stage of development often have a larger vocabulary, know all their letters and can usually read picture books with or without help.

ASL's manual alphabet is one of the keys to its effectiveness.

"If you make the letters with your hands, you're seeing it, feeling it, and there's a pattern," says Rachel Coleman, creator of the ASL-based Signing Time! product series. Coleman's oldest daughter, Leah, is deaf though fully bilingual in ASL and English. Leah could spell and read by age 2.

"By making physical, visual, tactile and kinesthetic connections, you're committing it to memory," says Coleman. "That's a great advantage for elementary-age kids." Signing Time! has been adapted into the half-hour PBS TV series by the same name.

"The signs for some objects are the letters they start with, like "W" is the sign for water," adds Leit.

Other words and proper names don't have designated signs and must be spelled out. The reliance on letters for expression helps children understand the role letters play in building words, giving them a strong head start in spelling.

Cognitive Stimulation

A growing body of academic research confirms ASL's power as an effective learning intervention. In her seminal book, *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy*, Marilyn Daniels, Ph.D., an associate professor of speech communication at Pennsylvania State University, discovered that signing promotes brain growth and development by stimulating both the right and left sides of the brain. Also, because each language a child learns is held in a distinct memory store, signing children draw information from two separate wells, creating a built-in redundancy that facilitates learning.

In a subsequent study, Daniels discerned that ASL instruction expands kindergarteners'

receptive and expressive English vocabularies and raises their emergent reading level.

Research from the University of California Davis found that by age 8, children who had been taught to sign as infants scored as many as 12 points higher on IQ tests than their non-signing peers.

Not Signing Yet?

Experts agree that it's never too late to start signing, and kids don't have to be fluent in the iconic language in order to reap its benefits. Even a few simple signs and the manual alphabet can help children make academic gains at any age.

Cave Creek, Ariz., teacher and ASL instructor Jenning Prevatte uses signs in her kindergarten class to highlight vocabulary and sight words. This multi-sensory approach eases the transition to reading, she says, and the benefits continue to support child development up to the fifth grade.

Or longer, say some. Richmond, Utah, ASL educator Leslie Briggs introduced signing into her eighth grade literacy classes. She found her students to be quieter, more engaged, and eager to take an active role in their own learning.

"Whenever I incorporated signs into my lessons, test scores improved," she says. According to Briggs, this strategy has proven itself to be helpful for students who struggle academically. Her book, *Signing in School*, is a practical guide for incorporating ASL into the classroom curriculum.

ASL also acts as a bridge between languages. Studies show that children pick up foreign languages faster when vocabulary is presented in signing as well.

Best of all, say proponents, kids enjoy signing so they're eager to learn.

"It's amazing how children take to signing and how quickly they grasp it," says Leit. "Signing adds a new, fun dimension to their educational experiences. And when learning is fun, kids learn better and retain knowledge longer."

RESOURCES

BOOKS

- *Dancing with Words: Signing for Hearing Children's Literacy*, by Marilyn Daniels, Ph.D., Bergin and Garvey, 2001. A comprehensive guide on the ways hearing children can benefit from learning sign language.

- *Signing Smart with Babies and Toddlers: A Parent's Strategy and Activity Guide*, by Michelle Anthony, Ph.D., and Reyna Lindert, Ph.D., St. Martin's Griffin, 2005. Includes suggestions for daily signing activities as well as playtime signing ideas.

DVDs

- *Sign-A-Lot* — Recommended by Dr. James Sears, this award-winning series teaches ASL vocabulary in a creative and fun way while it encourages children to be participatory viewers. signalot.com.

- *Signing Time!* — From the creator of the PBS show, these inspirational DVDs help promote your child's development and encourage communication through ASL. signingtime.com.

CLASSES

- *SignShine* — Certified Sign2Me Network presenter Etel Leit offers workshops, classes and free story times at various locations throughout the Southland. SignShine.com, 310.613.3900

ONLINE ASL DICTIONARIES:

aslpro.com

babysignshine.com/etels_diet.php

lifefprint.com/asl101/pages-layout/signs.htm

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