

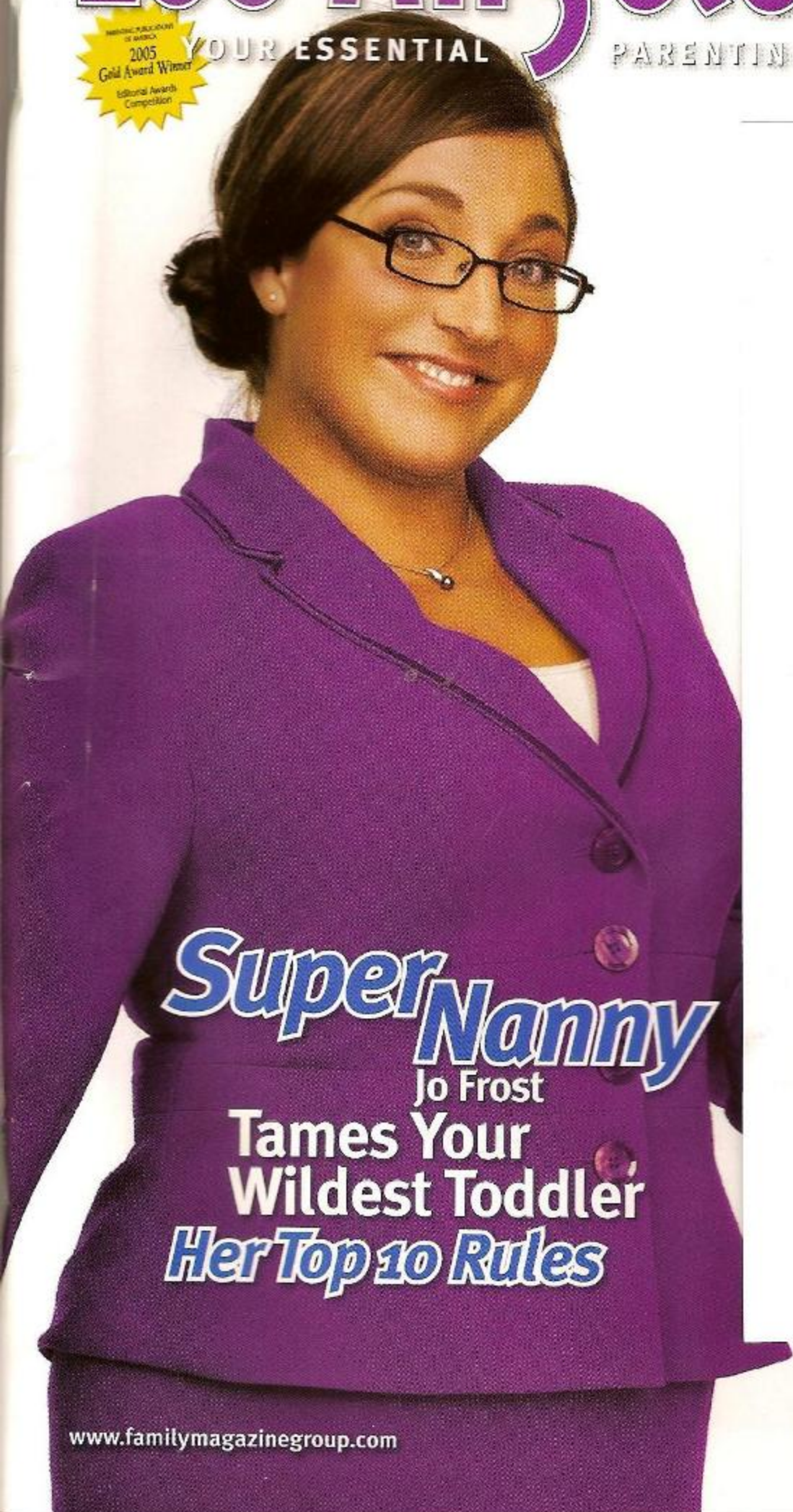
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## Signs of a Happy New Year

By Catherine Anaya

The start of the New Year is usually fraught with resolutions that often times end up going by the wayside by summer. If your New Year will bring with it a new baby, here's an idea: learn to communicate with your child without using words.

You probably laughed like I did at the scene in the movie "Meet the Fockers" when Robert De Niro's character signs, "I'm watching you" to various family members, including his infant grandson. Especially when "baby Jack" signed back!

People across the country may not be signing those exact words to their babies - but they are signing.

We know American Sign Language (or ASL) isn't new. It's the communication of choice for the hearing impaired. But what is new is the trend it's become among parents and caregivers who have been using it to communicate with their hearing children. The result among other things, according to one instructor, is a boost in baby brain power.

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# Happy New Year

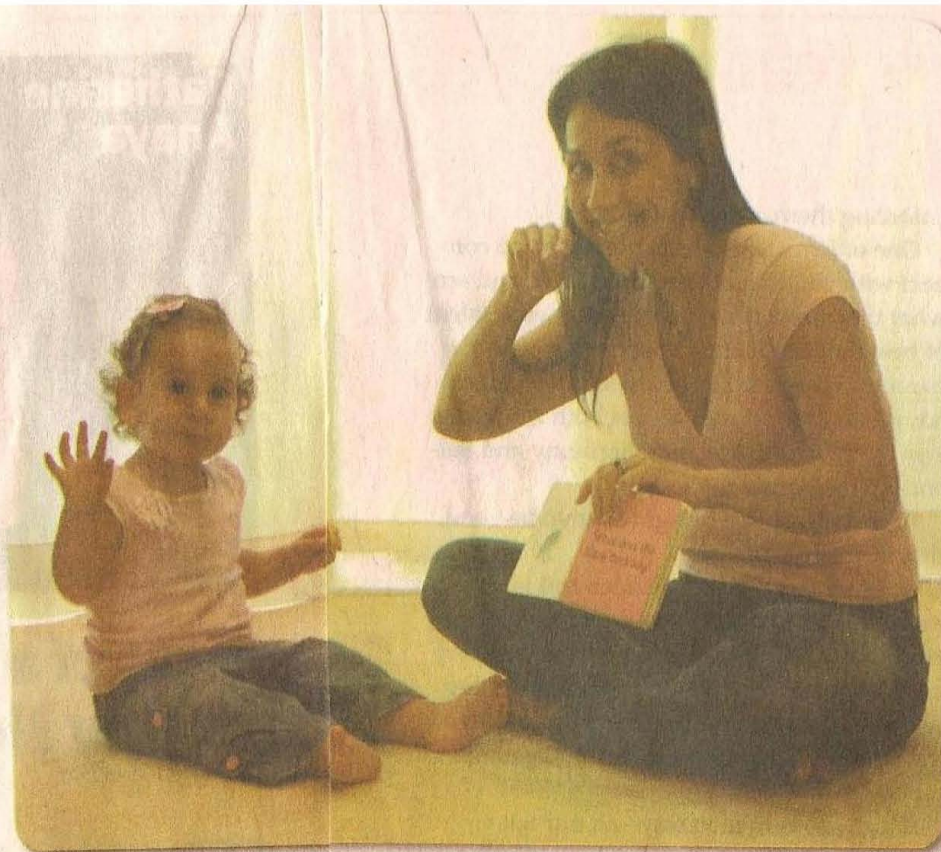
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"Now research is showing that not only can they communicate with you earlier and talk to you without verbalizing the words, they actually can spell better, because in sign language you use letters for spelling... they bond with you better, they're more relaxed and less frustrated," says Etel Leit, a certified language specialist and baby sign language instructor.

I first learned of signing for the hearing community 9 years ago when my daughter was born. I was given a book called, "Baby Signs" as a gift. I flipped through it with interest but quite frankly, never had the time to actually sit and master the skill.

A good friend of mine took an American Sign Language class about 4 years ago and taught it to her children. She'd proudly show off how her infant son could tell her when he was hungry, tired and even angry without using the words. But over the years, I figured its popularity had waned- until I started my son in preschool last fall and noticed a posting about sign language instruction for toddlers. Then I heard that actresses like Debra Messing and Julia Roberts sign with their babies.

Before I had a chance to wonder what I was missing, I got a call from Leit. The enthusiastic instructor can give you a plethora of reasons why signing is so popular and according to her, very successful.



"(Researchers have proved that) by the age of eight babies that sign, their IQ is 10 to 12 points higher (than babies that don't)... they use cells in the brain that other babies don't use," She says.

Leit tells me sign language can strengthen not only the communication between parent and child but also the relationship between siblings. Even more enticing: she says it's fun and easy to learn!

"We read a lot of books, we sing songs and we play games... because I'm really geared into developing their language skills. It's not only signing... and they become better learners," she adds.

Leit points to her own 2-year-old daughter

as proof this form of communication works. She says, by the time her daughter was only 15 months old, she was communicating more than 60 words through sign language.

She admits some people have expressed concern that their children's speech will be delayed because of signing. But she says it's actually the complete opposite. "Signing doesn't come ahead of talking. It comes with talking." Leit says that with deaf people you use sign language to communicate without the verbal language. But with baby signing, you're speaking with the help of signing so the child gets used to hearing the word and its context.

She is so passionate about the success she's had in her own home, she recently made baby sign language her work. Last fall she started SignShine workshops and classes that teach more than 100 practical ASL words - not made-up signs - and incorporate the vocabulary into fun learning activities like songs and storytelling. Leit says the children start using their new skills almost immediately, much to the delight of Mom and Dad.

"I love it when I see parents faces... they see their child from a different perspective."

If learning a new way to communicate isn't enough of a motivation for you to make it a New Year's Resolution, consider this: Leit says baby sign language reduces separation anxiety, frustration and behavioral problems.

And you know the old saying- a happier baby means a happier you!

For more information on Sign-Shine classes and workshops go to [www.babysignshine.com](http://www.babysignshine.com).

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