The following article is adapted from HighScope’s forthcoming book, Ready, Sign, Go! Using Sign Language to Promote Preschool Learning.

With the growing interest in signing by hearing people, sign language is no longer simply viewed as a visually beautiful language, or strictly as a mode of communication for those in the Deaf community. Increasingly, preschool teachers and caregivers are discovering the many benefits of using sign to support the learning and development of their hearing students in the areas of literacy (including improvements in children’s vocabulary, reading ability, and spelling proficiency), communication, and second language learning. Evidence also suggests that learning how to sign can enhance young children’s brain functioning, boost their self-esteem, and give them a concrete (and appropriate) way to express emotions.

Indeed, the potentially positive effects of learning sign language sound “like magic,” says Marilyn Daniels, a professor of speech communication at Penn State University and author of Dancing With Words: Signing for Hearing Children’s Literacy (2001). In addition to enhanced literacy skills, Daniels explains, “Sign also facilitates communication, is an effective tool for establishing interaction between home and school, aids teachers with classroom management, has been shown to promote a more comfortable learning environment and initiates an interest in and enthusiasm for learning on the part of students” (p. 3).

1. Sign language enhances brain activity and brain functioning. Because signing is a kinetic (motion-oriented) activity, it stimulates activity in both hemispheres of the brain: the right brain, which is responsible for visual-spatial reasoning and long-term memory, and the left brain, which is responsible for processing language. When you are signing with hearing children, you are not only reinforcing their existing verbal language by stimulating the left hemisphere of the brain, you are also teaching them another way to express language and planting it in their long-term memory, thus creating another connection to that information in their brain. This process also helps to establish two memory stores for language in the brain’s left hemisphere: one for English (or the native language of the user), the other for sign. So children who use both spoken language and sign language develop a built-in redundancy of memory, storing the same word in two formats in separate areas of the left brain. This dual storage system is useful to children’s long-term memory because it strengthens their brain connections and creates another memory store from which to draw information.

A growing body of research also indicates that ASL, used as a second language in young students’ bilingual education, has distinct advantages over a spoken language in that it “also offers its users superior visual spatial skills which may translate to better sight word recognition, reading ability, larger English vocabularies, and further both receptive and expressive language development” (Daniels, 2003, p. 66).

2. Sign language enhances fine motor coordination. All infants have the motor control to approximate the signs to say words before they acquire the vocal skills, because...
1. Sign language is a real language used by members of the Deaf community. As one teacher explains, not only does learning sign language help hearing children communicate with those who have hearing impairments, but it also gives them “an appreciation of the manner in which children with hearing disabilities communicate and learn” (Cooper, 2002, p. 119). Explain to children that deaf people use their hands instead of their voices to communicate, because the Deaf cannot hear. Your children may wonder or ask, “If the deaf can’t hear, does this also mean they can’t talk?” The answer is no. Many Deaf people can talk — they just choose to communicate with their hands. You can also explain to children that when some deaf people speak, their voices may sound a little different than a hearing person’s, and you might have to listen more carefully to understand what they say.

Raising awareness of the Deaf community and culture can be a rewarding benefit in your early childhood program as children learn to understand and respect differences in others. In addition to linguistic and cultural diversity, differences also exist in children's physical, cognitive, and developmental abilities. You may have a child in your classroom who uses physical aids (e.g., crutches, wheelchair, hearing aid) or has a speech delay. It is important that all children be recognized by their peers as active members of the class. Again, using sign language as a means of communication in the classroom can foster children’s appreciation of differences, with the potential for “breaking down barriers to participation” (Brereton, 2008, p. 322).

As Sue Buckley and Gillian Bird explain in their article “Including children with Down syndrome (Part 1),” “The other children have the opportunity to learn to understand the effects of disability and to learn how to care for and support children with a variety of needs. They will learn that all children with disabilities are children first, with the same psychological, emotional and social needs as all other children...” (1998, Schools as Agents of Change, para. 5). Sign language can be just as beneficial with your students who are second language learners, providing a common ground for communication. (For further discussion of these topics, see #6 below.)

2. Movement actually promotes good health in many ways. Consciously controlled and coordinated movements stimulate production of neutrophins (stimulate nerve growth), increasing the number of connections in the brain. The more precise the movements, the more developed these networks will become (Hanaford, 1995).

3. Sign language raises awareness of diversity. Sign language can also open the door to introducing your children to the Deaf community, the world of deafness, and sign as another language. It is important to let children know that sign is a real language used by members of the Deaf community. Getting to Know the HighScope Curriculum

This guide presents a comprehensive introduction to the HighScope Preschool Curriculum, covering theory and research, teaching practices, curriculum content, assessment, and training. Whether you are planning to adopt the HighScope Curriculum or are just looking for information on what it takes to have a successful active learning environment, this book is a must-have! WC-P1335 $29.95
more sophisticated play (2009). In addition, when babies and toddlers are able to communicate their needs, their level of frustration is reduced, and tears and tantrums are less likely. The ability to make themselves understood fosters feelings of competence and trust in children and results in more positive adult-child interactions — essential to a child’s development and sense of well-being.

6. Sign language serves as a language bridge for children with special needs and children for whom English is a second language. Children with special needs, which limit their ability to hear or communicate verbally, may use sign language as a means of expressing themselves and connecting with their teachers and fellow students. Signing provides a means of communication for children with various types of developmental delays, including those related to physical development, cognitive abilities, social-emotional or adaptive functioning, and receptive and expressive language.

In a six-month study of children ages from birth through age six, who had been diagnosed with, or whose communication difficulties suggested, the presence of disorders such as autism, Down syndrome, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and/or learning disabilities, researchers “engaged children, as well as those who teach and parent them, in building a bridge of signs to meaningful communication — including that produced by speech” (Toth, 2009, p. 85). While children in the study showed different levels of achievement depending on the complexities of their disability, the overall conclusion of the study was that even children severely compromised by cognitive, developmental, and physical impairment, will strive to communicate, and when given the opportunity to explore a visual and gestural language such as ASL, will “triumph” over their communication disabilities (pp. 93–94). Since some of the behaviors associated with autism and other disabilities (e.g., aggression, tantrums, self-injury) have been associated with the frustration that comes with the inability to communicate (Edelson, para. 2), signing may help to reduce these behaviors by giving children a much-needed means of expression.

### Children compromised by cognitive, developmental, and physical impairment have been shown to “triumph” over their communication disabilities using ASL.

Signing can be also used to help English language learners (ELLs) learn English. Signing gives them a way to communicate with the adults and other children in the classroom. Students will acquire not only English but also ASL, making them, in essence, trilingual. In fact, “using ASL signs with a child of any age who is learning more than one spoken language actually aids in the acquisition of the second language” (Schabow, 2010, para. 3).

### References


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